
DOES ECONOMIC INDICATORS OF SUSTAINABLE TOURISM PRESENT A PROMISING TREND OF RURAL DESTINATION DEVELOPMENT? ATTITUDES OF VOJVODINA RURAL RESIDENTS

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ABSTRACT

To be considered sustainable, tourism in rural destinations should provide long-term economic benefits and have a push-up effect on the population's determination to engage in sustainable tourism. Also, sustainable tourism must reduce the negative effects of business activities on the natural environment and improve the quality of life as well as the standard of living of the local population. In order to check the impact of sustainable tourism on the development of rural destinations, economic indicators of sustainability are most often used, as measurable indicators of sustainable development. In the paper, we examined the attitudes of 421 local residents using the TIAS scale, in 17 Vojvodina villages. Only those who declared that they are involved in the tourism economy were taken for further analysis. It was concluded that positive economic indicators of sustainable development are "wind in the sails" of the development of rural destinations, and that sustainable tourism is a desirable economic activity in the villages of Vojvodina to whom more and more residents are turning, especially women as of very sensitive category.

Introduction

Tourism can long ago be said to that is a catalyst for rural development. It is a two-way principle that at the same time contributes to raising awareness of the importance of the development of rural destinations, while that development is taking place

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(Kachniewska, 2015). The authors believe that only what is sustainable is desirable (An & Alarcon, 2020), which means that such forms of tourism, which can carry the epithet “sustainable”, are important for the development of rural destinations. Whether something is sustainable or not is viewed through a kind of sustainability indicator prism. These are economic (Quaranta et al., 2016; Boley et al., 2018; Petelca & Garbuz, 2020; Akhtar, 2023), sociological (Quaranta et al., 2016; Petelca & Garbuz, 2020) and ecological sustainability indicators (Ahmadi et al., 2018). The extent to which certain indicators will provide sustainable results applicable to rural destinations depends on a number of factors (Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2012; Wardana et al., 2020), and above all on the local population and its perception (Lin et al., 2017; Kurniawan & Cahyono, 2020; Lindberg et al., 2021). Many scientists have dealt with this topic (Dyer et al., 2007; Ma et al., 2022; Hu et al., 2023), the attitudes of the local population and in what way to influence those attitudes. It turns out that the economic aspects of development are the most visible and have the most far-reaching impacts (Vujko et al., 2021). According to Blake (2009), the economic indicator “creation of new jobs” directly affects the gross domestic product (GDP), and it expresses the economic well-being of rural areas, and thus the overall well-being of the country. Bearing in mind that the development of tourism affects the creation of new jobs (Strzelecka et al., 2017), it is assumed that the local population will be directly involved in the benefits of development and thus be a part of sustainability. The assumption that there are attractions at the destination that are able to satisfy some of the heterogeneous tourist needs without jeopardizing the possibility that future generations will also satisfy that kind of needs (Fallon & Schofield, 2006) must be included. According to Balaguer & Cantavella-Jorda (2002), the economic aspect of sustainable development implies ensuring the economic well-being of the population in order to improve the standard of living and the quality of life of both the individual and the entire community. Here, special emphasis is placed on the economic empowerment of women in rural areas, on which sustainable tourism in the economic sense has the greatest effect (Maksimović et al., 2019). Economic indicators are therefore excellent indicators of the long-term possible determination of the community in which direction it should develop, and if the balance turns out to be positive, these indicators are an important basis for examples of good practice and they show how, based on the positive experiences of the local population of some rural destinations, others rural destinations can develop. Therefore, the economic indicators are in direct relation with the environment of business practice, business excellence and sustainable business, which sustainable tourism in rural destinations certainly is.

The paper started from the initial hypothesis H1 that the economic indicators of sustainable development are the basis of the determination of the local population to engage in tourism in rural destinations, and that tourism is a factor of village survival in modern conditions. Using the opinion of the local population directly involved in the tourism industry in 17 Vojvodina villages, the paper tried to show that sustainable tourism directly affects rural development in the destinations, and represents the backbone of the quality of life and the increase in living standards.

By development of economic indicators of sustainable development would create a system of continuous monitoring of the quality of life of the local population in rural destinations, thus giving state structures a powerful tool for comparison with the indicators of other local communities, i.e. rural destinations, which would create a basis for defining possible directions of development and action priorities.

The research methodology

A total of 421 local residents from 17 Vojvodina villages were surveyed, which were proposed by the Provincial Secretariat for the Economy of the Government of AP Vojvodina and are part of the “Wealth of Diversity” project, the Danube tourist cluster “Istar 21”. We wanted to examine the attitudes of the local population, which is directly involved in the tourist economy, in the broadest sense. We considered that such a population would be competent to give answers which concern the issue of economic indicators of sustainable development of tourism in rural destinations. From the initial number of respondents, 303 of them, who declared that they are directly employed in the tourism industry, were taken for further analysis.

The “Wealth of diversity” project of the Danube tourist cluster “Istar 21” was started in 2011 when 14 villages were initially included, and in 2012, 3 more villages were added. The goal of this project was the development of a multicultural tour through Vojvodina and Danube Region, through the presentation of this region of Europe as a unique tourist product. Project activities are aimed at raising the level of service quality of cluster members through innovation and education, then strengthening cooperation between cluster members, increasing the capacity of the cluster for the realization of larger projects and marketing activities. The villages that were chosen and analyzed in this paper, listed in alphabetical order, are: Banoštor, Bački Monoštor, Bezdan, Belo Blato, Velebit, Golubinci, Gudurica, Donji Tavankut, Kovilj, Krčedin, Ruski Krstur, Selenča, Skorenovac, Stapar, Stari Slankamen, Totovo Selo and Turia.

The paper presents a unique model for measuring the impact of tourism development on the attitudes of the local population (most often in rural areas), called TIAS (Tourism Impact Attitude Scale - TIAS). This scale was created on the basis of several significant methodologies proposed by eminent theorists, such as Likert (Likert, 1967, 66-67), Churchill (Churchill, 1979, 66-67), Parasuraman and associates (Parasuraman et al., 1988, 15 -22). In 1994, American professors Samuel W. Lankford and Dennis R. Howard (Lankford & Howard, 1994a) write a scientific paper entitled “Developing a Tourism Impact Attitude Scale” (Eng. “Developing a Tourism Impact Attitude Scale”) and publish it in the reference journal “Annals of Tourism Research” (eng. “Annals of Tourism Research”²⁴) in number 21(1). Although the original scale has 28 items grouped into two factors, in our work we will use a modified version of 12 questions grouped into 3 factors adapted according to the original variables of Lankford and Howard (Lankford & Howard, 1994a, 130; Kunasekaran et al., 2011; Long & Kayat, 2011; Woosnam, 2012).

In this way, a model with 12 modified questions was obtained, which are grouped into three factors that directly rely on the economic indicators of influence on sustainable development of tourism on the development of rural destinations, and which are named as follows:

Factor 1 (F1) - Benefits from tourism development for individuals and the local community (Personal and community benefits) groups the variables:

F1a - My neighborhood has better roads and sidewalks thanks to the development of tourism.

F1b - Quality of public services (health, cleanliness, water supply, fire protection etc.) in my neighborhood has improved thanks to the development of tourism.

F1v - I have more money thanks to tourism.

F1g - Tourism has an impact on increasing my standard of living.

F1đ - Jobs provided by tourism are very attractive.

F1e - In my settlement, the number of shops has increased as a result of the development of tourism.

F1ž - Tourism will play a leading economic role in my settlement in the future.

Factor 2 (F2) - Concern/support for local tourism development groups the variables:

F2a - The development of tourism should be actively encouraged in my place.

F2b - My settlement has the resources to become an attractive tourist destination.

F2v - Tourism needs to become the main economic branch in my settlement.

F2g - The development of tourism in my settlement will provide more employment opportunities for the local population.

Factor 3 (F3) - General opinion on tourism development (eng. General opinion) includes variables:

F3a - The community should encourage more intensive construction of tourist facilities.

F3b - Tourism plays an important role in the community's economy.

To understand the relationship between gender and these economic indicators, we used Pearson Chi-Square Tests for each variable separately. If the value of p is less than 0.05, it is considered that the Chi-Square Test shows statistical significance in relation to the gender of the respondent, while a value of p that is greater than 0.05 indicates the absence of statistical significance.

Result and Discussion

A total of 421 respondents participated in the research. Respondents were asked to answer the question, are they involved in the tourismic ecinimy? Out of the total number of respondents, 303 answered positively, while 118 respondents answered negatively.

Therefore, a sample of 303 respondents, declared to be in the tourism industry (197 male and 106 female respondents), was taken for further analysis.

The respondents were then asked to state in which sector of the tourism industry they are employed. The answer to that question can be seen in table 1. In this table it can be seen that most of the employees are in the catering sector (hotel and restaurant industry).

Table 1. Sector of tourism industry

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Accommodation	62	14,7
	Hotel industry	68	16,2
	Gastronomy	55	13,1
	Restaurant business	32	7,6
	Food production	16	3,8
	Production of souvenirs	37	8,8
	Service activities in tourism (guiding service, recreation, animation, etc.)	9	2,1
	Transport	4	1,0
	Trading	3	,7
	Hairdressing services	4	1,0
	Renting of means of transport	4	1,0
	Local self-government	4	1,0
	Project activity	1	,2
	Education	2	,5
	Destination management	2	,5
	Something else	118	28,0
Total	421	100,0	

Source: Autors, 2023

The first part of the results shows Factor 1 (F1) - Benefits from tourism development for individuals and the local community (Personal and community benefits). These results indicate the economic aspects of development, i.e. the improvement of the standard of living, the quality of life of the local population and the determination of the population to engage in tourism in the future. Table 2 indicates data regarding the tourist infrastructure network, one of the main prerequisites for tourism development (Gao & Wu, 2017). It can be seen and concluded that the local population believes that the infrastructure is in a much better condition since tourism began to develop in their places. According to Kumar et al., (2020) tourism and infrastructure are in a symbiotic relationship, so these answers are not surprising (Song, et al., 2020).

Table 2. State of infrastructure in settlements

		Gender		Total
		Male	Female	
My settlement has better roads and sidewalks, thanks to the development of tourism	I completely agree	123	82	205
	I agree	70	23	93
	No changes	4	1	5
Total		197	106	303

Source: Autors, 2023

Table 3 shows the interdependence of responses in relation to the gender of the respondents, and as $p=0.29$ it can be concluded that there is no statistical significance, that is, both male and female respondents agree that the change is positive.

Table 3. Pearson Chi-Square Test

	Value	df	Statistical significance (p)
Pearson Chi-Square Test	7,059 ^a	2	,029

Source: Autors, 2023

The quality of any business is expressed in different categories, and one of the most significant is revenue (Germanovich et al., 2020). The bottom line is to make as much profit as possible, and the respondents agreed that they have more money thanks to tourism (Table 4).

Table 4. Income and tourism

		Gender		Total
		Male	Female	
I have more money thanks to tourism	I completely agree	170	92	262
	I agree	23	13	36
	No changes	4	1	5
Total		197	106	303

Source: Autors, 2023

Table 5 shows that in this case as well, there is no statistically significant difference in the respondents' answers in relation to gender, that is, both men and women agree that they have more money thanks to tourism. This is a particularly important statement considering stereotypes and prejudices. According to Maksimović et al., (2019) women are generally in less favorable positions compared to men. They are paid less than men, are in worse positions, and at the same time are usually more educated and usually take care of the entire family (Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009). This data points to the awakening of awareness about gender equality, which can be a prerequisite for the revival of villages and the return of young people to rural destinations.

Table 5. Pearson Chi-Square Test

	Value	df	Statistical significance (p)
Pearson Chi-Square Test	,516a	2	,773

Source: Autors, 2023

If we would say that the standard of living represents a set of living and working conditions of the population (Ruiz-Real et al., 2022), then of extremely importance is the opinion of the population that precisely tourism affects the increase of the standard of living (Table 6). The standard of living is directly related to employment (Nunkoo et al., 2020), and the development of tourism in rural destinations is directly related to the creation of new jobs (Vytautas & Vytautas, 2014). Therefore, the connection between these two statements is clear. Observing the standard of living from the aspect of tourism development, it can be said that it is all related to economic development and determination of rural destinations to develop in that direction.

Table 6. Standard of living and tourism

		Gender		Total
		Male	Female	
Tourism has an impact on increasing my standard of living	I strongly agree	170	91	261
	I agree	23	14	37
	No changes	4	1	5
Total		197	106	303

Source: Autors, 2023

Table 7 again shows the uniformity of respondents' answers in relation to gender, where both men and women have a uniform attitude: the development of tourism in rural destinations has positive economic effects on the lives of them, both.

Table 7. Pearson Chi-Square Test

	Value	df	Statistical significance (p)
Pearson Chi-Square Test	,628 ^a	2	,731

Source: Autors, 2023

There are studies (Kortoci & Kortoci, 2017; Ling et al., 2023) that support the fact that tourism creates numerous jobs in various sectors such as catering, transport, souvenir trade and other services (Table 1). The increase in employment directly affects the increase in household income (Table 4) and reduces unemployment. The population of rural destinations "feels" an increase in the standard of living (table 6), which is reflected through numerous positive aspects of sustainability. One of those aspects is both attractive and very dynamic workplaces. Working with people is exactly that: dynamic and attractive (Vunjak et al., 2020). Table 8 shows the respondents' agreement with that statement.

Table 8. Jobs and tourism

		Gender		Total
		Male	Female	
Jobs provided by tourism are very attractive	I completely agree	179	88	267
	I agree	14	18	32
	No changes	4	0	4
Total		197	106	303

Source: Autors, 2023

Table 9 shows that both male and female respondents agree that jobs in tourism are very attractive, considering that there is no statistically significant difference in the responses of the respondents in relation to gender.

Table 9. Pearson Chi-Square Test

	Value	df	Statistical significance (p)
Pearson Chi-Square Test	8,996a	2	,011

Source: Autors, 2023

As it is an activity in which the multiplication effect is highly developed (Verma et al., 2023), the respondents' answers regarding the development of other economic activities as a result of the development of tourism are quite normal and expected (Table 10). Trade is one of those activities that is directly proportional to the increase in the number of tourists at destinations.

Table 10. Trade and tourism

		Gender		Total
		Male	Female	
The number of shops has increased in my settlement as a result of the development of tourism.	I completely agree	172	83	255
	I agree	21	23	44
	No changes	4	0	4
Total		197	106	303

Source: Autors, 2023

Table 11 shows that there is no statistical significance regarding this issue, when the gender of the respondents is concerned. Both men and women agree that shops should be opened in their villages and that they are directly related to the development of tourism.

Table 11. Pearson Chi-Square Test

	Value	df	Statistical significance (p)
Pearson Chi-Square Test	8,599 ^a	2	,014

Source: Autors, 2023

The second part of the results shows Factor 2 (F2) - Concern/support for local tourism development. Table 12 shows the views of the local population regarding their long-term determination to engage in tourism as an economic activity. Long-termism is synonymous with quality (Singh et al., 2022), which means that in this way the foundations are laid for future generations, such that professions in tourism are left as a legacy, and the rural destination takes on the epithet “sustainable tourist destination”. Many scientists believe that the name and surname in this context, the brand and the quality that everyone recognizes and is always happy to return to.

Table 12. Economic aspects of tourism development

		Gender		Total
		Male	Female	
In the future, tourism will play a leading economic role in my settlement	I completely agree	180	98	278
	I agree	17	8	25
Total		197	106	303

Source: Autors, 2023

Table 13 shows that there is no statistically significant difference in relation to the gender of the respondents, which also has a very significant foundation in the statement that precisely tourism is an excellent base for the sustainable development of rural destinations. In tourism, more than in any other activity, there is room for work and development for both men and women.

Table 13. Pearson Chi-Square Test

	Value	df	Statistical significance (p)
Pearson Chi-Square Test	,107a	1	,744

Source: Autors, 2023

Given that the majority of respondents declare that tourism should be actively invested in and that it must be developed in the future as well (Table 14), it is clear that it is an activity that has economic effects on their personal lives and on the community. Everyone is satisfied.

Table 14. Respondents' attitude towards the development of tourism in the future

		Gender		Total
		Male	Female	
The development of tourism should be actively encouraged in my place	I completely agree	163	87	250
	I agree	20	18	38
	No changes	14	1	15
Total		197	106	303

Source: Autors, 2023

Table 15 indicates that both male and female respondents gave uniform answers to this question, that is, there is no statistically significant difference in the answers in relation to gender.

Table 15. Pearson Chi-Square Test

	Value	df	Statistical significance (p)
Pearson Chi-Square Test	7,854 ^a	2	,020

Source: Autors, 2023

When talking about rural destinations from the aspect of tourism, we are talking about attractiveness factors that are becoming more and more popular among modern tourists. Ethnographic values of Vojvodina (houses, old workshops, farms, windmills, shadoofs, folk carts, music, dance, etc.), together with the rich gastronomy of these regions, represent attractions with a world contractive zone. Food and drink in combination with the ethno environment, as well as natural resources, represent the main potential for the development of rural tourism, with which the respondents agree (Table 16).

Table 16. Tourist attractions and tourism development

		Gender		Total
		Male	Female	
My settlement has the resources to become an attractive tourist destination	I completely agree	147	61	208
	I agree	37	41	78
	No changes	13	4	17
Total		197	106	303

Source: Autors, 2023

Taking into account that a statistically significant difference in answers in relation to gender, can be observed for this question (Table 17), the conclusion is that male and female respondents perceive tourist attractions differently (Temelkov & Gulev, 2019). Women prefer handicrafts and jobs related to gardens and economic yards, while men consider gastronomy as a key attraction.

Table 17. Pearson Chi-Square Test

	Value	df	Statistical significance (p)
Pearson Chi-Square Test	14,506 ^a	2	,001

Source: Autors, 2023

Regardless of how one evaluates what is to whom attractive more and what is less, both men and women of the observed rural destinations agree that tourism should become the main economic branch in their villages (table 18).

Table 18. Comparative advantage of tourism development

		Gender		Total
		Male	Female	
Tourism should become the main economic branch in my settlement	I completely agree	164	81	245
	I agree	20	22	42
	No changes	13	3	16
Total		197	106	303

Source: Autors, 2023

Both male and female respondents agree with this statement, given that there is no statistically significant difference in the respondents' answers in relation to gender (Table 19).

Table 19. Pearson Chi-Square Test

	Value	df	Statistical significance (p)
Pearson Chi-Square Test	7,841 ^a	2	,020

Source: Autors, 2023

Completely compatible with the previous attitudes in relation to the economic aspects of tourism development in rural destinations, respondents to the greatest extent believe that the development of tourism will also provide more opportunities for employment of the local population in the future (table 20). There are studies that show the connection between tourism and other economic activities, primarily transport, trade, agriculture and the like. Investments in the tourism economy directly affect all aspects of business. What stands out here is the empowerment of women and female entrepreneurship, through handicrafts, marketing of finished products in the form of winter meat and other meat products, production of brandy and wine and the like (Vujko et al., 2018). It is a system from which everyone can benefit, so investing in tourism in rural destinations should be one of the main priorities for every country.

Table 20. Predispositions for the development of tourism in rural destinations

		Gender		Total
		Male	Female	
The development of tourism in my settlement will give more employment opportunities for the local population	I completely agree	131	64	195
	I agree	51	38	89
	No changes	15	4	19
Total		197	106	303

Source: Autors, 2023

Both men and women have equal views on whether they see a future in tourism. There is no statistical significance in the respondents' answers in relation to gender (Table 21).

Table 21. Pearson Chi-Square Test

	Value	df	Statistical significance (p)
Pearson Chi-Square Test	4,350 ^a	2	,114

Source: Autors, 2023

The final part of the research shows Factor 3 (F3) - General opinion on tourism development. This is primarily about the influence that decision-makers at the Municipal level, and then at the Provincial level, have on the development of rural destinations. Tourism must be a development priority. This is indicated by all previous researches (Vujko & Gajić, 2014), including ours, where all answers were in the highest percentage a reflection of the complete agreement of the local population, with the statement that tourism is the backbone of the sustainable development of rural destinations. In Table 23, we can see the attitude of the respondents regarding the construction of a different tourism suprastructure, as a basis for the development of tourism. Respondents agree that the construction of a tourist suprastructure is desirable and necessary for the further development of tourism in rural destinations.

Table 22. Tourism superstructure and development of tourism

		Gender		Total
		Male	Female	
The community should encourage more intensive construction of tourist facilities	I completely agree	148	82	230
	I agree	43	16	59
	No changes	6	8	14
Total		197	106	303

Source: Autors, 2023

Both male and female respondents agree with the previous statement (Table 23), considering that there is no statistically significant difference in the responses of respondents in relation to gender.

Table 23. Pearson Chi-Square Test

	Value	df	Statistical significance (p)
Pearson Chi-Square Test	4,672 ^a	2	,097

Source: Autors, 2023

The last answer in the TIAS scale questions related to the question of whether respondents think that tourism plays an important role in the community's economy. It did not differ from other answers because the respondents in this case overwhelmingly answered with a completely positive attitude. Namely, respondents believe (Table) that tourism in rural destinations plays an important role in the overall economy of the entire community. Regardless of what activity they are engaged in, if tourism is developed in rural destinations, they are all directly or indirectly relied on tourism. Each activity plays its role in creating a complex tourist product.

Table 24. Tourism and economic development

		Gender		Total
		Male	Female	
Tourism plays an important role in the economy of the community	I completely agree	157	83	240
	I agree	30	17	47
	No change	10	6	16
Total		197	106	303

Source: Autors, 2023

Table 25 shows that men and women have the same opinion regarding this position, that is, that there is no statistically significant difference in the respondents' answers in relation to gender.

Table 25. Pearson Chi-Square Test

	Value	df	Statistical significance (p)
Pearson Chi-Square Test	,091a	2	,956

Source: Autors, 2023

Conclusion

The conclusion regarding the research is visible at first glance, because all points of the TIAS scale confirm the initial hypothesis H1, that economic indicators of sustainable development are the basis of the determination of the local population to engage in tourism in rural destinations, and also that tourism is a factor of village survival in modern conditions. By this, it is first of all meant that rural destinations have problems with intensive depopulation, and that tourism can represent a peculiar factor of rural preservation and the effect of attracting young people to return from cities to villages. Especially the highly educated workforce, it is visible that both male and female respondents have a positive attitude towards tourism as a sustainable form of development of rural destinations, primarily because of the economic indicators of that development. If something changes so that everyone gets better and everyone can feel that improvement, it is clear that they will be in favor of such a direction of development.

Tourism, more than any other activity, unites different economic activities into one whole, so that even the smallest links in the chain feel equally important and have an equally important role for the whole. It is a question of the multiplicative influence of tourism, which is primarily based on the circulation of tourist consumption funds in the economy, which affects the entire economic activity of rural destinations, but also the economic activity of the State. Therefore, the most visible indicator of sustainable development of tourism in rural destinations is economic.

In the paper, economic indicators are presented as starting points for sustainable rural development, that is, in what way tourism directly and indirectly affects the standard of living and quality of life of the local population. In addition to activating and using existing resources (natural-geographical and social-geographical characteristics),

tourism requires certain investments in infrastructure and superstructure, as well as investments in personnel, which implies the creation of numerous jobs. In this way, the revitalization of rural destinations is encouraged, because depopulation is one of the biggest problems of the modern countryside.

Bearing all this in mind, one of the conclusions of the work is that tourism in rural destinations requires greater involvement of tourism policy holders. Here, first of all, we are referring to the relevant ministries, as well as tourist organizations and associations. It is necessary to make more efforts to present examples of good practice, such as the “Wealth of Diversity” project, of the Danube tourist cluster “Istar 21” to the wider rural public, and other villages to involve also in active sustainable development of rural destinations through various educations and new projects, highlighting tourism as the leading activity of the national economy.

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